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RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 8299
RUEHBW/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 5528
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 2755
RUEHGE/AMEMBASSY GEORGETOWN 0395
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 2936
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 3581
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 4819
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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 002386

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/29/2017
TAGS: ECON PGOV PREL PHUM BL
SUBJECT: TWO THIRDS OF BOLIVIA STRIKES AGAINST EVO

Classified By: A/DCM Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) The departments of Cochabamba and Chuquisaca joined Bolivia's media-luna (Pando, Beni, Tarija and Santa Cruz) and held a 24-hour general strike (paro civico) on August 28. The opposition is calling the strike an overwhelming success, since it paralyzed the six departments and demonstrated the people's frustration with the central government's policies. Meanwhile the ruling Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) government claimed the strike was a failure because it was only a partial strike, the organizers used coercive tactics to force compliance, and there were violent episodes in Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, and Beni. More confrontations, including violence, are near certain in the coming weeks as both the government and opposition are determined to show they have popular support and are calling on their hard-core supporters to take to the streets.

Autonomy and Democracy, Yes; Communism, No

¶2. (C) The civic committees of Beni, Chuquisaca, Cochabamba, Pando, Santa Cruz, and Tarija organized the general strike. The strikers' key demands were for the government to respect democracy and departmental autonomy, and for the MAS to stop imposing its political agenda on the country without considering the demands of the opposition. They also called on restoring the legislative and executive branch to Sucre and for the government to respect the independence of the courts, namely the constitutional tribunal. Despite continuing MAS claims that only the rich city-dwellers of Santa Cruz support the civic committees, Emboff observed that all elements of Santa Cruz society participated in the strike. In the outlying areas of Plan 3000 and Villa Primero de Mayo, Emboff witnessed local members of the Santa Cruz Club de Madres out on the streets cooking for the strikers and spiking the tires of cars whose drivers tried to ignore

the strike.

Violence and Vandalism

¶3. (C) Cochabamba and Santa Cruz were the focal points of confrontation, with only minor incidents in Beni and Tarija. In Cochabamba pro- and anti-government groups clashed despite a sizable police presence. One police officer was injured in the confrontation, and the police detained several people.

Despite a call from Santa Cruz Civic Committee Branko Marinkovic for protesters to behave peacefully, members of the Union Juvenil Crucena (Youth Union of Santa Cruz) were filmed vandalizing shops and attacking shop keepers. Minister of Government Alfredo stated that three members of the Youth Union were arrested. In Santa Cruz, Emboff noted that the Santa Cruz youth union seems to be radicalizing: one group waving Santa Cruz flags drove through town in a jeep emblazoned with swastikas.

Amcit Arrested, Released

¶4. (C) In Cochabamba, twenty-year old American citizen, Daniel Ruiz Arapo, was arrested and detained for eight hours.

Police reportedly thought that the black SUV he and other detainees were driving belonged to the Prefect. The four detained youth were transporting wire mesh, fireworks, Bolivian flags and a civic-committee flyer explaining the purpose of the civic strike. On the advice of civic committee counsel, the four youth did not make a statement, and they were ordered released due to lack of evidence of a crime.

Comment

¶5. (C) The regions that struck on August 28 are already announcing further pressure tactics for August 30. In a speech to a cocalero women's meeting in Chimore on August 28, Vice President Garcia Linera asked that social movements "defend the process of change and the government through mobilization." The mayor of Santa Cruz Percy Fernandez declared on August 28 that the country should be split into two nations, an eastern lowland nation which would include part of Cochabamba and Chuquisaca, and a western highland nation. Whereas civil war or secession remain unlikely, violent confrontations between Morales supporters and the opposition are almost guaranteed.

¶6. (C) While the Bolivian government is desperately trying to downplay the strike, this is the first time the departments of Cochabamba and Chuquisaca have joined with the four media-luna states in a public display against the government. Such a show of force against the government in these two departments was unthinkable only a few months ago. The question remains whether the growing opposition will motivate Evo to enter into a serious dialogue and compromise or simply make him more determined to steamroll ahead. Unfortunately, the local conventional wisdom, leans towards the latter. Stay tuned.

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